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ABSTRACT

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The Scylla of Helms, the Charybdis of Mapplethorpe: Obscenity and Morality in the Art Class

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Abstract

The relationship between possible obscenity in the arts and practices in the school art classes is discussed. The issue of whether or not a teacher can advocate unristricted freedom of speech-expression is raised and the problems for the teacher caused by attitudes in the contemporary art world are outlined.

The recent furor over Mapplethorpe photograph exhibitions and the related attempts by Congress to prevent funding of "obscene art" through restrictions for the National Endowment for the Arts have raised issues related to morality, ethics, aesthetics and -- as I hope to demonstrate -- education (Hartigan 1990). These issues are not new. Ever since Aristotle pondered the paradox of our enjoyment of suffering in tragic drama, people have been puzzled by the strange relationship between aesthetic response and the artistic presentation of subjects we would avoid, if possible, in everyday life. This puzzling relationship includes the presentation within an aesthetic framework of unethical and immoral actions for us, the citizens of virtue, to observe. What the Mapplethorpe and other stories in the media have done is to raise public consciousness about the possibility of obscenity in art works.

Prior to the Mapplethorpe affair, but continuing through it up to the present, religious fundamentalism has grown in decibelage, if not in numbers. This fundamentalism has taken on itself a campaign to force a reform of public morality, according to its own doctrines. Thus, Senator Helms appointed himself as the voice of fundamentalists and became an advocate for repression of what he deems obscene.

Now what has all this to do with philosophy of education? I will try to demonstrate that the atmosphere created by the Mapplethorpe-Helms affair (if I can couple those names so suggestively) has a great deal to do with a need for thinking through issues that will have to be faced by schools, issues that cannot in

conscience be decided without careful consideration of the end goals of education, the well-being of students, and our own true beliefs. It is my belief that sooner or later the issues raised by the NEA crisis which arose because of the Mapplethorpe scandal will come to the schools and we need to be ready with a response that goes beyond mere reaction.

In order to discuss the issues I feel need to be considered, I will examine three factors: The attitudes typical of Western artists, fundamentalism as it has so far effected the schools, and teachers and their relationship to freedom of speech. I'm not going to pretend to full treatment of these issues, nor will I attempt to solve anything. I hope only to arrive at the truly philosophical stance of making easy things complicated.

Attitudes Prevalent in the Art World

Since Michelangelo, Western Artists have demanded a right to individualistic expression. This insistence on statements not in conformity with traditional views, has sometimes been unpopular. After years of full nudity Michelangelo's figures in The Last Judgment had to have convenient little scarves painted over their genitals so as not to lower the morals of the clergy and laity who observed the figures. Manet in The Luncheon on the Grass showed a naked woman sitting at a picnic with two fashionably dressed young men in a park and shocked the very same people who accepted paintings showing nude women and half-animal satyrs cavorting much more strenuously

in the outdoors. Though Manet's nude was not exhibiting her genitals, Manet was intent on showing up the hypocritical attitudes towards sexuality in art.

When we turn from the world of art -- that is, the relatively small territory of artists, art historians, art critics, college art teachers, aestheticians, collectors, curators, etc. -- to the world of the public schools, we find that the "epater le bourgeoisie" (bait the bourgeonie) attiude of so many post-Renaissance artists is not widely accepted.

Since fifth century B.C. Athens, the nude has figured largely in Western art, rising or falling in importance with the degree of societal emphasis on this, the secular, world (Clark 1959). Despite its art historical importance, the nude has not been a widely accepted subject in art in the public schools, despite the fact that it had neither the stigma of the unconventional nor that of outragous modernity.

So far I have tried to point out a crisis in the contemporary art scene and the attitudes which have separated the art scene from the school art world. Now I want to focus on art as a school subject.

I. Art in the Schools

At the 1990 annual National Art Education Association Convention a presentor recapituiated recent uproars and urged art educators to publicly stand up for the National Endowment for the Arts and the First Amendment (Rush 1990). Despite my liberal bias, I was struck by the thought that there was a difference between the agendas of the art world and the school world, that the art teacher as educator of the young might not have the same stance as the

citizen outside the schools. Indeed, the art world in the heat of battle had not recognized that there is an overlap between the aesthetic and the moral, that the long reign of formalist rejection of the moral-immoral designations was finished and had, in fact, never been universally accepted. The school world has never been able to ignore the relationship between art and morality and the arts in the schools are now, more than ever, vulnerable to attacks related to these issues. The art world's usual and standard protestations that moralism has no role in art are irrelevant to education and outworn in the art world. Strangely enough, I have found but one article in more or less contemporary art education literature that discusses moral issues and this article dates back to 1973 (Gropper 1973). Gropper discussed the choices of art work for classroom study as suggested by the philosophic stances of neo-Thomism and Experimentalism. The author did not address the issue of school art in a social context.

The arts in the schools might avoid much of the current conflict by retreating to either of two philosophies of art. Either the extreme formalist theory of art or the expressive theory of art might be used as a refuge (See Smith 1987). In the first theory, educators might claim that art is more or less design or the manipulation of formal concerns to achieve an abstract ideal of well-organized two- or three-dimensional space. 'Art for art's sake,' is the slogan associated with this approach, although we might need to extend the idea of design beyond the fine arts to crafts and to the design of objects in our environment. The second approach to art could be used if art was understood to be only self-

expression, with little reference to artists' expressive reaction to social or political events, or more specifically, to sexuality.

These two approaches to art are, however, both undermined by the contemporary art educator's insistence on art history and art criticism, as well as studio production. Emphasis on the history of art has to permit the examination of adult-made works, and, as I've already indicated, the artist in the Western world has often assumed an attitude that will be sure to rankle the conventional -minded person. Pre-Renaissance or non-Western art are not safe-havens either if a representative sampling of their subject range is attempted. Still, if art history is to be included, it fits into the sort of thinking expressed by Hirsch and Bloom, (see Hirsch 1987), especially if art history is treated as an introduction to a canon of masterpieces to develop so-called cultural literacy.

Contemporary with, but often contrary to, the Bloom-Hirsch syndrome, with its demand for attention to Western European-derived exemplars of the cultural heritage, is a cry for multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-gender concerns (Feinstein 1989). Thus, study of a cult mask from the Congo may be demanded along with, or even replacing, study of the Apollo Belvedere. Indeed, a few loudly call for the abandonment of the study of works of white, European-based, male, dead artists and their replacement by works of living women, such as quilt-making, along with study of works which have been labeled minor arts. Or, some even ask us to dump all study of fine arts or crafts, to concentrate on popular culture.

And, to return to an issue mentioned earlier, there has been the rise of fundamentalism. This may threaten even the usual content of art curriculums, as well as thwart the schemes of advocates of cultural literacy or multi-ethnic pluralism.

Perhaps fundamentalists could be soothed if school art could claim it was a moralistic activity. Around 1900 American art educaiton in what was called Picture Study claimed that great art had a moral message. They based this claim on ideas of Ruskin and, perhaps, of Tolstoi (Smith 1986). This sort of thinking soon ran aground on the shoals of modern non-narrative art and the art-for-art's sake theorists. In light of today's art scene it cannot be reconstructed, although as I will suggest, a certain moralist undertone does lurk in the contemporary art world.

Fundamentalists, aside from a streak of iconoclastic thinking present in Protestantism, view art as powerful and potentially dangerous. As did God when he said, "Thou shalt not make graven images," the fundamentalists mistrusts the power of art to sway the mind with emotions, and to awaken the unruly appetites of the body. Peckham pointed out in his book, Man's Rage for Chaos, (1965) our Western artists constantly play with anarchy of the mind and heart. Fundamentalists and totalitarians are in agreement on the treachery of the arts and the persuasive power of the arts.

But, even if the most innocuous examples of art are to be studied, they are not safe from fundamentalism. For example, a recent text for art teachers

about teaching drawing to elementary school students (Wilson, Hurwitz & Wilson) uses Perugrino's Presentation of the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven to St. Peter for a lesson on creating illusions of space. Perugrino's insipid figures are fully clothed and nearly everybody in sight is a saint. This painting by Raphael's teacher is an undoubted milestone of Renaissance art and shows that era's way to represent space very clearly. The problem is its subject matter. It is Catholic doctrine given visual form. You may believe that a fundamentalist could be told that you study Perugrino's work for its form alone, but that argument is unlikely to work. What happens when a child asks what is going on in the picture?

Let me illustrate why I say fundamentalist will reject the study of images as historic relics by relating a personal anecdote. In 1985 I was teaching in public school. In fifth grade classes I was eager to have students study native American arts, from Mexico to the Arctic. We began by looking at and responding to Aztec images. I was hardly guilty of cultural relativism since I told the students how much the Aztec's neighbors hated them and how repugnant their sacrifices were, but that they created splendid works and a city that even the Spaniards praised for its beauty. I concentrated on the artistic power of Aztec images.

Shortly after my presentation a student handed me a note from his mother. Her child loved Jesus, the note told me, and he was not to do anthing reflecting heathenish devil-inspired false religions and -- here is the major problem -- he was not to look at such objects. He was not to be asked to look at

any art work from Aztec hands, or from the hands of any person expressing beliefs different from those of his parents.

Suppose this school had had a signifcant number of Hispanic students. This lesson would have dealt with their cultural heritage. The child of the fundamentalists would have been told his classmates' heritage was the work of the devil and he need learn nothing about it. Would the same argument have been used for the art of Black Africa? Of course it could have been made since so much of that art is related to non-Christian beliefs. In that case, the fundamentalist student could never learn about one of the major influences on modern art, or the rich culture heritage of his African American classmates, a heritage which was denied their ancestors by the obscenity of slavery. Even if work is restricted to European art, will a fundamentalist Christian accept a thousand and more years of Orthodox or Catholic iconography?

Another art teacher (Stinespring 1990) has told how a fundamentalist student would not fulfill a previously agreed upon assignment about Greek classical art because of the prevalence of pagan subject matter in that art. In this case, the impractical nature of pursuing cultural literacy is obvious. If this student is to be excused from hearing about, seeing and responding to this part of our nation's cultural heritage, other children should be excused from study of Buddhist art, or of Northwest Indian art, and so on and so on. One can well imagine a chaos of censoring and the eventual impossibility of studying art or any other discipline in public school.

However, to return to the issue of obscenity, we would all agree that some images from the past or present cannot be shown in schools. There are always some images we deny to the young.

In our culture the nude is not usually a subject studied in public school art classes. Children may see nudes on museum field trips or in some park. In recent years, some books for children have included nudes, but Maurice Sendak on publication of the children's book In the Night Kitchen found some resistence to his nude boy. As a rule, nudes are not included in school art lessons, unless the nude is a baby. As long as Eros is a Valentine Cupid, he can be let it into the classroom, but even he will have to cover his genitals.

This attitude is not altogether an expression of school priggishness. Even in the notoriously blasé world of New York art circles there is an unstated consensus that representations of sexual subjects hold different degrees of rightness-wrongness. For example, the painter Eric Fischl has won a great deal of recognition through his images of children exposed to adult sexuality. The reason why these images have had such impact, aside from Fischl's control of the formal means of art, lies in the feeling of tension set up by his subject. In other words, there is some kind of consensus in our society that there is something wrong with children being exposed to adult sexuality.

Of course, real children being exposed to adult sexuality can be the basis for charges of crime, but the point here is there is a feeling of disquiet and disturbed sense of right and wrong action even among those who may seem to

have abandoned all conventional restrictions, but who have intellegence to perceive Fischl's implied horror. I would venture that this is a perception of something that could be called obscene. If we pursue this we may be able to arrive at an educator's definition of obscenity.

Apparently many people restrict the use of the word obscene in reference to art to the depiction of sex acts. Sex acts outside the rules of decorum of society are regarded as immoral, but violent and harmful actions, which are also immoral, are not ordinarily labeled obscene. Other uses of obscene (i.e., Country-Western music is obscene) are regarded as special or affected uses of the term.

As I previously said, I had the impression at the 1990 National Art Education Conference that terms were being asked to wholeheartedly endorse the notion that the National Endowment for Arts should have no moral guidelines. Yet teachers themselves, whether teachers of literature or the visual arts, routinely exclude works of art that they regard as violating the mores of their schools' communities or as developmentally harmful. Like Fischl's audience, they are disturbed by the association of children and adult sexuality, but, regardless of their personal appreciation of Fischl and even of his obliquely moral message, they do not show ten year olds his work. They censor on moral grounds, although they may obscure this by claiming that exposure to these images would be developmentally harmful. The notion that First Amendment privileges

are unrestricted for teachers and for students and that subject matter should be unrestricted is utopian at best and not really desired by anyone.

Conclusion

While personally I object to politicians giving moral guidelines to anyone -- their own conduct makes the idea grotesque -- I have to admit to the following.

1. Although artists have a right to say what they wish, there is an ethical problem in requesitng public funds for disseminate views that are regarded as violating the ethics or morality of a given community.
2. There seems to be, even in circles cognizant of the most unconventional views of the avant garde, an underlying recognition that some subjects associated with sexuality have elements that might be called harmful.
3. Teachers cannot claim to wholeheartedly share demands for unrestricted freedom of speech because they do not demonstrate a committment to this in their actions in educational settings.
4. Finally, there is the possibilty that certain subjects depicted in art works may be threatening to the well-being of the young. Perhaps that is the real definition of the word "obscene."

Obviously, I have solved nothing. I hope, however, that I have indicated that there are many conflicting issues related to the current debate over the freedom of artists to express their views and the necessary constraints exercised by educators in the arts. We must think carefully in order to be able to make sound choices which can be defended if we are challenged either by those who wish to censor or those who do not wish to censor. Whatever our position vis-a-vis censorship and obscenity we must have reason for what we chose.

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